UNBOOKS CLASSICS

Eschaton

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To Kim.

“Eschaton” by GoulashFan

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Compiled by GoulashFan, July 2026.

PART 1: ASTEROID

THE USS *ENDEAVOUR*, an Apollyon-class ship, was sailing through the cosmic latte of the Verderon 3 system. Orbiting the binary stars of that system were five planets, Verderon 3a through e, and it was on 3c that the Verderons, colloquially known as the Kelpi, lived. The six-year mission of the *Endeavour* was to catalogue and explore the width and breadth of the galaxy and beyond, to categorize and enter every detail knowable into the ship's database, above all, the existence of newly discovered lifeforms and civilizations, including the Kelpi. They were a relatively primitive civilization that had only colonized three of their twin sun's five planets and possessed only a meager holding some five light-years away from their home system, but they were an amicable people and less violent than most. The Commonwealth of Sovereign States had sent the *Endeavour* on a mission to assess the Kelpi for

possible adjudication after a Kelpi scout ship had intercepted a Commonwealth-flagged cargo vessel on its way to Sagittarius A*, transmitting garbled messages of peace and understanding. It was up to Captain Laurel Goodday and his steely crew to make first contact.

"Captain, I'm reading elevated levels of gamma radiation off our starboard bow," said Ensign Ina Morata, the science officer on the bridge, who was wearing a tasteful mini skirt. Goodday would say she had the look of a real ingénue, and he would marvel at the way her lovely bob of black hair would never get frazzled, despite the terrors of space.

"The ship's starting to list starboard, Captain," said Lieutenant Tebow Marseille, the ship's chief helmsman, who was wearing a slightly less tasteful kilt in the traditional "freeball" style. He needed a talking-to about that soon.

Captain Goodday looked at the bridge screens, sleek and inset within the walls as if a giant window, out into the vast, inky black of space. "Steady as she goes, helmsman Kilt—I mean—Marseille. This sector of space is known for being a little bumpy. The slipstream's not as slippery here, but we should make it to our destination in due time."

Suddenly, red lights flashed from the window screen, and an eerily-calm female computer voice started chiming. "Terrain. Terrain. Asteroids

ahead. Terrain. Terrain." An errant bolide had crashed into a small planetoid just minutes before the *Endeavour* was to cross the corridor. A dozen asteroids, not to mention many hundreds of tiny meteorites, were scattered across their path, and even one collision could cause catastrophic damage.

"Evasive maneuvers!" said Captain Goodday. "Marseille, drop us out of the slip. Let's noodle our way out of this mess." Marseille deftly steered the ship through the errant asteroid field, although many tiny micrometeorites pinged off the ship's shields like rain on a tin roof. Random sparks and wisps of smoke blew from the consoles, and the bridge rumbled to the point that Ina Morata tumbled out of her seat, a minor indignity on account of her mini skirt. Thankfully, Marseille was strapped to his seat—Goodday wanted no repeat of the last "freeballing" incident: the mental image of Marseille's family jewels would forever be lodged inside his head. Morata crawled back to her station, her hair still tussled, with random patches of harmless black dust caked on her face. The consoles remained functional, despite having exploded the second before.

Then it appeared, the largest asteroid of them all. "Reverse! Reverse!" Goodday shouted, but it was too late. They would crash spectacularly into the asteroid, with only seconds left until impact. It seemed almost hopeless for the *Endeavour*, until

suddenly, rays of bright white burst out from the middle of that asteroid before a circular explosion consumed it fully, utterly obliterating it and clearing a path for the *Endeavour* to go through unharmed. It was a Kelpi ship, one of their quaint, trombone-shaped vessels, which greeted the *Endeavour*.

"Captain, they're hailing us!" said Morata. Goodday coolly asked for their feed to be transmitted on screen.

The Kelpi captain, an eight-limbed greenish creature with a circular torso all covered in smooth skin, appeared on screen. You could tell he was captain by the armbands on their limbs, mainly on the stalks used for seeing and hearing. Charming. The universal translator's incongruously calm voice came to life by the captain's console.

"I am glad you are well," said the Kelpi captain. "This route is unsafe. We apologize if our star chart transmissions did not go through."

"Don't worry about it," replied Goodday. "We shaved off at least eight hours in travel time. Tell your bosses you really saved our hides, they'll give you a medal for it." The Kelpi crew looked at each other in a somewhat befuddled manner, or at least, their equivalent of it.

"Thank you, Captain Goodday of the Commonwealth. We politely urge you to follow the new set of coordinates we have handed you.

You should arrive within two-and-a-half hours." The Conn screen beeped as navigational corridor data was received through a secure channel. Marseille dutifully set the ship's navigation to their custom route, following a nod of approval by Captain Goodday.

"Marseille, you have the bridge," said Captain Goodday as he left. He gave Ina Morata a knowing look, and she excused herself, letting another ensign take her station, as she went to the back to see if they had any more self-sealing medbolts. The ship's navigational array was always getting skewered by microbolides, and the self-sealing type would allow the array to adjust naturally without constant fiddling with the navigation UI, or worse, a manual spacewalk to tweak the settings. Marseille took the captain's chair, adjusting his kilt for modesty reasons. The helmsman flashed Morata a faint smile, hoping one day he'd muster the courage to ask her out on a date.

PART 2: LESBIAN KARAOKE

WHEN GOODDAY AND Morata retreated to the navigation room to help with the repairs, she had tried to plug the self-sealing medbolt into her navigational receptacle, and the internal docking joinery seemed a little too tight until she applied a silica-based powder lubricant that got the job done. Afterwards, they retired to the captain's quarters to have sex, ending eventually in the "prone-bone" position. Goodday enjoyed it because of his limited cardio, and the motion of smothering a smaller, softer thing made him feel vaguely powerful, and Morata enjoyed it because she could close her eyes and disassociate to a feeling more pleasant than staring at exoplanetary spectroscopy graphs for hours.

When they had finished, Morata excused herself, and Goodday stayed in his room, putting

on a pair of VR spectacles. With another two hours and seventeen minutes to fill, he browsed through the projected UI options until he found his favorite historical recordings: Lesbian Karaoke. This was not smut in the traditional sense—anyone could use a holo-room to bang fifteen green-skinned space babes (and suffer through the haunting thought they were merely thrusting into projections of hardened light, suspended on motes of artificial sunbeams). He was plugged into a Superdeterministic Chronovisor via a two-way ansible: with enough knowledge of a physical environment's current state, a sufficiently advanced computer can calculate, particle by particle, the exact configuration of each atom, object, and person, as if rewinding the tape on an ancient VHS. Humanity had since solved every cold murder, every conspiracy, the fate of every missing person, who shot John F. Kennedy, and even who Max Headroom was.

A heuristic algorithmic assistant could sift through this rerecorded footage and organize it via a user-supplied topic. Superdeterministic Chronovisors were available to Commonwealth officers of sufficient rank, although for privacy reasons, actual sex and nudity were blurred by default, along with audio: even pillow talk was blurred below the clavicles. Additionally, certain sensitive portions of the historical record were sealed to everyone except the highest-level

officers. But everything else was preserved: the longing looks two friends who wanted more would make across the room and the way two dancers would sway to a sad song from their youth and hold each other close. Goodday considered it a higher, purer form of voyeurism, which was in his reckoning an extension of voyaging.

Goodday was virtually taken to a scene from 2019 CE, at a party in Stuyvesant Heights. This was his newest favorite couple to ogle. Sarah, a young blonde in her mid-twenties, and Dalia, an Egyptian-American of similar age. Dalia had an odd habit of putting on a pair of Groucho glasses to sing duet karaoke with Sarah. They were singing "Will You Love Me Tomorrow," each holding the same mic together, gazing sweetly into each other's eyes, even through the Groucho glasses. Sarah would occasionally lean her arm on Dalia's shoulder, and Dalia would grab her wrist as if to push her arm away, but she'd hold her wrist in her hands for as long as she possibly could until she'd set her arm down. When Sarah sang, she mixed up the word "light" for "look," and Dalia laughed as Sarah said, "I could've sworn it was 'the look of love.'"

And when their song was done, Dalia and Sarah watched the other partygoers sing karaoke, and they rolled their eyes at the man who pulled up the song "Tequila" as if that bit wasn't already ancient, and they sat next to each other by a

slightly ratty couch the movers had to saw in half to bring up to the apartment, and Sarah leaned against Dalia—still wearing the Groucho glasses—and ran her fingers through the hairs on the nape of her neck.

Goodday, despite the vigorous tryst with Morata, felt so hot and bothered that he switched his VR spectacles to “Holo-Room” mode and enjoyed the space babes therein. He fell asleep until awoken by the chime on his intercom. It was his first officer, Commander Michaud, telling him that the ship would land in the Kelpi homeworld in fifteen minutes. “I’ll be right up, Commander,” said Goodday. “Just brushing up on my Verdoran literature.”

PART 3: DELEGATION

THE USS *ENDEAVOUR* slowly dipped into the atmosphere of Verderon 3c, at a speed gentle enough to avoid the fires of reentry. The natives called their planet Kelpika, and the sky was in a state of perpetual twilight, lit occasionally by wispy tendrils of green auroras from their twin suns' constant flaring. The planet was tidally locked, so almost all Kelpi civilization lived in a thin strip between the scorching heat and the perpetual dark. On the view screen, the capital of the Kelpi resolved into view. Their architecture looked somewhat like the sloping, organic curves of the Sagrada Família back on Earth, although the simpler buildings looked like tall stalagmites. The Kelpi would use their limbs to scoop up the limestone sands on the drier edge of their habitable ring into their orifices, digesting that slurry with their acidic stomachs, before extruding the paste to harden into buildings that would

accrete over many years. They had modern technology now, although the old ways were still taught in their academies.

There was something unsettling to Goodday in the way the Kelpi were fond of their excreted architecture. The xenologists on Earth would make a distinction between the chambers used for digestion and handling waste and the creation of the build slurry, or they would lecture in raptured fascination that the Kelpi could eat specific portions of different materials to create different colors or byproducts with special properties, with each Kelpi functioning like a nozzle in a biological 3D printer. Goodday thought it was all just window dressing, intellectual scaffolding, for the truth: they built their homes out of their own shit. Slightly shiny, hard, marble-like shit, but shit nonetheless. He kept his thoughts to himself, as any good diplomat would, and when the ship landed on a giant platform in their central palace, he hid his disgust at being surrounded by Kelpi excretion. When he stepped out from the cargo bay into the platform where the Kelpi diplomats greeted him via their eye stalks vibrating, he placed his hand over his heart and bowed slightly. Handshakes were unknown to them.

The two Kelpi led Goodday and Michaud into something like a large hall flanked on both sides by open window spaces, covered only by a billowy mesh of something rope-like and organic. The

sun's light pierced right through the mesh, casting grid-like shadows on the hall. They sat in chairs custom-made for human sitters, surprisingly ergonomic for an object made by aliens. Goodday and Michaud sat on one side of that long table, and the Kelpi sat on the other, their ambulatory limbs folded beneath them. Two devices, one Kelpi and one Commonwealth, translated each species' talk to the other.

The Kelpi ambassador, Pomik, spoke first: "Explain adjudication again?"

Captain Goodday cleared his throat. "It's a scary-sounding word, but really, it is closer to our word for evaluation than judgement. It's the Commonwealth term for the process by which we assess newly discovered civilizations for admission into the Commonwealth."

"Success means admission, what does failure mean?"

"Nothing bad. We will remain friendly, and trade relations will still be established. It simply means the Verderons will be outside the jurisdiction and protection of the Commonwealth and will not receive the benefits and rights befitting a sovereign state. Don't think of it as a loss, merely a smaller gain than a larger one."

"How about the probes orbiting our planets, even the one around our extrasolar colony?" The Kelpi seemed slightly suspicious.

"We've allowed your sensor probes on our

worlds. It's only fair we do the same. It's telemetry data, gathering information about your planets' geology and geography. We are scientists, not just soldiers. I say this in all fairness, you know much more about us than we do of you."

That seemed to have assuaged the Kelpi, somewhat. "We've scanned the probes multiple times… they appear harmless. When will your 'adjudication' decision be made?"

"By tomorrow, at least in Earth days! My first officer and I are just awaiting the decision from Central Command. Afterwards, whether we get good news or bad, I'll open that vintage Dilurian brandy Commander Michaud here keeps raving about."

"Your brandy, a drink it seems? It would be an honor to partake in your drink culture, although it would have no effect on our physiology."

"Well, you seem like observant people. You can enjoy watching its effects on our physiology." Goodday felt confident that the talks were going well. "Worst comes to worst, you can appeal the decision in ten Sol years' time."

"There is one thing we are wondering, nothing concerning, just a question. Your ship is an 'Apollyon' class vessel, yes?" Goodday nodded, and the Kelpi translator read it as a yes. "Doesn't that mean 'Destroyer' in one of your languages?"

Goodday shrugged, "A leftover from a more primitive era in Commonwealth history, back

when our survival meant self-defense through power. To protect those we love, we had to destroy those who threatened to kill them. It seems barbaric now, but it was a necessary bit of morale building. Our *Endeavour* is an 80-year-old tub, despite its shiny new coat of paint. But yes, we cringe a little at the name. It makes us seem theatrical."

The Kelpi did their equivalent of nodding along, and they did their vibratory farewell before retiring to their chambers for their final deliberations. Goodday returned to his ship, which would stay landed on the planet until the adjudication was concluded. He returned to his private quarters, where a message from the Admiralty awaited him. In big bold letters, the message on his desk console said, "DENIED. PROCEED."

PART 4: AFTERNOON DELIGHT

ENSIGN MORATA WAS off doing the final tests on the aerosol sprays, and Lieutenant (junior grade) Beltrán was being her usual self, in that place between flirty and standoffish, so Goodday was left alone in his room with the VR spectacles, gorging on the many-legged space babes of Tau Ceti. In real life it was a lifeless rock, and he quickly switched over to the Chronovisor to check up on the lesbians and their karaoke. Sarah and Dalia were in a crowded cellar that stank vaguely of stank, watching a guy in a purple sweater absolutely bomb, looking back at the brick wall behind him with increasing unease, but he brought the crowd back by poking fun at a man's situationship in the front row. They took the A from West 4th, then took the G from Hoyt-Schermerhorn and got off at Bedford-Nostrand,

walking some distance to a friend of a friend's house show in Bed-Stuy, which left their ears ringing. By the time they made it to Sarah's apartment, Sarah said, "It's getting a little late. Why don't you... stay overnight? I like, just bought a karaoke machine."

"It's like, 11PM," said Dalia.

"Yeah, super late." Sarah made sure to stress super.

"And all my stuff is at my place," Dalia said. "I mean, most of it."

"I know you always pack something for overnight."

"Yeah, a romper," said Dalia. Goodday made a note to look up what a romper was. It sounded vaguely hot.

"You can just put that top over it."

"Not this one," Dalia said, pointing to the green cardigan she was wearing over her dress, which now stunk vaguely of beer. Dalia remembered the guy with the red Solo cup and the vest jacket, pacing the floor for some reason. She had bumped right into him.

"I have tops and jackets."

"Jacket over a romper?"

"What, is that a faux-pas or something?" Sarah was genuinely unsure.

"No," and Dalia paused. "They'll recognize it at work."

"What? I have a lot of jackets, and nobody at

work cares if we—" and Goodday, hovering over them with his Chronovisors, grew so obnoxiously bored of their talk that he fast-forwarded, but he jumped too far, and they became a tasteful blur on the couch, the audio obscured until you could hear only vague hums like a fridge running. "Rewind, rewind," Goodday thought, and the UI obeyed his command. Sarah was fiddling with the cables on that karaoke machine until it whirred to life, blasting the room in a kaleidoscope of blues and reds. Sarah turned the big light off, leaving only the disco thing on top of the karaoke machine and the screen, where she was fiddling with the options on the app.

"You got the subscription and everything," Dalia said, vaguely amused.

Sarah gave her the stink eye. "I had to invest, this is kind of our thing." Goodday totally agreed. He was now munching on Cheddar & Sour Cream chips that the nutrient extruder had just prepared. He was still mulling over the sartorial logic of Dalia's objections before music started to play. It was "Afternoon Delight", an old Earth song known for its sensible cheekiness.

"This is our song!" Sarah declared.

"We have songs now?" said Dalia. "Won't the neighbors—"

"They're always complaining. Plus they're old, shouldn't they be going a little deaf?" Dalia relented, and the two belted out a slightly off-key

rendition of the song, utterly butchering the vocal harmony. Sarah cupped Dalia's cheek, so deeply in love with the fact that she wasn't wearing those Groucho glasses with the mustache she was sure was carcinogenic fish fur. When the song ended, Sarah and Dalia were left holding the mic together in the silence. Sarah turned the mic off before tossing it on the throw carpet. Dalia took her cardigan off, and they collapsed into the secondhand loveseat, which smelled vaguely of cigarettes and vanilla. Before long, the privacy blur came on, and Goodday took his VR spectacles off, his face flush with arousal.

Michaud was standing inside his room. "Commander, how long were you in here?" said Goodday.

"Approximately fourteen seconds, Captain."

"So you didn't see my hands underneath my trousers?" said Goodday.

"No sir, why do you ask?" Michaud said, stifling a laugh.

"Never mind, Commander, what's your update?"

"The Eschaton Probes, they've finished the scan. Every planet, down to the molecular level. Another civilization saved," said Commander Michaud. "You think they'll be mad when we bring them back?" Goodday loved the certainty of his "when", he wanted to borrow that certainty for what would come next.

“They’ll be somewhat miffed, but I’m sure I, or one of my many descendants, will smooth things over. Won’t complain long once you’re in paradise,” said the captain. He returned to the bridge with Michaud, where Marseille, Morata and the lovely Beltrán were already at their stations. He hailed the Kelpi ambassador as the ship darted away from the planet at a speed so fast that the gases around the *Endeavour* ignited into a fireball of billowing blue and white, but not before releasing a giant, spreading cloud of Verderonaphagic virus into their atmosphere. Other Commonwealth ships would be doing the same in their other colonies. Already, you could see those trombone-shaped Kelpi ships vaporized by hidden explosives or long-range slip missiles.

“This is Captain Goodday of the Commonwealth of Sovereign States. It pains me to say, but your application to the Commonwealth has been denied!” He said the last word with a certain theatrical relish.

“Captain, what is the meaning of this? You [UNTRANSLATED]!” said Pomik through the voice of the ship’s computer translator. Beads of white, ashy sweat were pouring from his skin. “Our sensors—”

“Your sensors are primitive, but you should take comfort that none of what we did could’ve been stopped by you.” The ambassador, along with several other Kelpi visible within the visual feed,

began to hiss and vibrate violently, before exploding into splotches of purple. If the Kelpi ever did feel fear or rage, they must have felt it then, just before they exploded into chunks. “You hate me now, but somewhere in the not too distant future, we’ll be sharing a bottle of Dilurian brandy, and you’ll greet me like an old friend!”

Ensign Morata stared blankly at the console, her hands shaking uncontrollably as the dots on the map showing alien life signs slowly faded into nothing. Marseille flew the ship past the Kelpi’s meager defenses, their homing missiles and orbiting mines pinging off the ship’s shield like arrows fired into the hull of a battleship. By the hour, the *Endeavour* was orbiting a safe distance from the Kelpi homeworld, listening in on the last of their garbled transmissions, the hisses and squeaks that Goodday imagined were their last goodbyes. The last of their fission missiles, their great equalizers, exploded harmlessly in space, too far from any Commonwealth ship to do anything but look like fireworks.

Goodday ordered a drink from a menu on his console. He chuckled sensibly when he saw a tropical cocktail called “Afternoon Delight.” He toasted the crew on another successful adjudication. Beltrán did the sign of the cross, Marseille closed his eyes and wept silently. Morata looked on in horror, her mind occupied by images of those dots disappearing and the quiet pride she

felt just hours earlier getting those blasted aerosolized launchers to work. Goodday gave Morata a knowing look. “Good work on fixing the aerosol mechanism, Ensign. You’re as much an engineer as a scientist.” Goodday raised his glass, wondering what he’d say to Pomik, or the six or so other alien ambassadors he’d met on his travels, when they came back. Something like, “I know you’re mad, but it all turned out for the best.”

PART 5: MAD

A HUSH FELL over the *Endeavour* as they watched the last of Verderon 3c's artificial lights die out. The Kelpi had just expanded into the darker edges of their planet, the artificial light allowing them to peer deeper and deeper into the dark. They'd even built an autonomous solar array on the brightest point of their planet, the part where the twin suns never stopped shining. Goodday was sure some of their cleverness could be folded into Commonwealth science soon enough. Their homeworld could be kept as a museum. The true prize, Verderon 3e, was distant enough that it orbited the system's goldilocks zone, the day-night cycle could be tweaked with a little geoengineering, and terraforming could begin in earnest once the last of the Kelpi had been expunged.

Goodday and Michaud shared a drink in the ready room, alone, save for the two of them. In

Goodday's view, Michaud was the only other man to truly understand what the Commonwealth was doing. They knew that one day, once the entire galaxy had been adjudicated, they could build the Eschaton, with the species accepted into the Commonwealth and all their ancestors moving freely in and out of the virtual, and the lesser ones kept safe in their paradises, maybe in quantum servers, maybe on real planets that fully mimicked their own once they'd learned their place. On the balance of it, the moral ledger was stacked infinitely in their favor, with the only inconvenience being the slight distaste of seeming like omnicidal maniacs in that brief, terrible interim. Michaud tried to dwell in both places, the good and the bad of what they were doing. "Two things can be right at once," the ancient AI soothsayers would say, said Michaud. Goodday leaned into the colonial feel of it, even though the analogy seemed a bit overwrought in his opinion. He was no Flashman, but playing the part felt more honest, more clean. The future would hate him anyway, might as well give them something fun to hate in the meantime.

They would stay in orbit for another week or so as the cleanup ships made their rounds. Ensign Morata was a mess, so he'd give her at least a day or two of mourning before Goodday would begin the healing process, Marvin Gaye style. He snickered a little at his thoughts, but in truth, he

was sure Morata would come around on her own. Again, Goodday retired to his room to check on his favorite lesbians. Sarah and Dalia were at work together, in a publication disguised as a news outlet that generated algorithmic slop the good old-fashioned way. Sarah was hard at work, writing an article on a daring, cutting-edge ingredient from Asia called the "chili crisp," when she saw Dalia thirty or so feet away, staring at her phone and shaking like a leaf. She ran up to her, bending down to catch her shoulder, and said, "What's wrong?"

"My mom's blowing up my phone." Dalia showed Sarah the screen: it was a very long, very mad message punctuated with ALL CAPS from Dalia's mom, on an app called WhatsApp.

"Why doesn't she use iMessage?" said Sarah. Dalia looked at her, a little baffled. Dalia's phone kept pinging as her mom kept adding lines to her tirade: What will your father think? What will your brothers think? What will your sisters think? What will your cousins think? What will your Uncle Bashir think? At that point, her mother was listing relatives from Cairo to as far as Melbourne. Sarah led Dalia to a break room, and Sarah ordered the interns, who were filming a skit for the channel, to get out. "Bring the fucking camera with you! Out! Out!"

"Does your dad know?" said Sarah.

"Yeah, he knows. I told him first. He's made

his peace with it. It's my mom. She's mad. I don't know if she'll ever stop being mad." Sarah gave Dalia a hug, and she rubbed her back as Dalia cried silently into her shoulder. Goodday thought it was the sweetest thing he'd ever seen. He almost cried himself. Thank goodness we live in a more civilized time, he thought, where mothers wouldn't dream of blowing up their daughters phones for having white girlfriends.

"... It's because I didn't wear the glasses," said Dalia, sobbing.

"Jesus..." Sarah was haunted by the feel of that carcinogenic fish-fur mustache.

PART 6: REALLY MAD

GOODDAY'S VOYEURISTIC BLISS did not last long. Suddenly, the VR spectacles stopped and blared a shipwide warning into Goodday's brain. He yanked the spectacles out and got into his Commonwealth getup. Armed redshirts wielding blasters roamed the halls. A computer voice rang through the corridors, "Hostiles detected. Hostiles detected." Captain Goodday yanked a blaster out of the hands of one of the young privates and headed towards the bridge, where Michaud was already seated.

"Status report, Commander?"

"We have visitors. Kelpi visitors."

"Where?"

Michaud paused. "We don't know how, but they've bypassed the shields. They're burrowing into the ship. A few dozen, maybe."

Morata chimed in, professional as always, "They're wearing a strange suit. It's plugged into

their stomachs, and it lets them shoot acid out of their tendrils." Nasty creatures, Goodday thought. "Multiple breaches!" Morata said, panicked. The sound of flowing stomach acid and grinding metal became louder and louder. Goodday ordered a squad of redshirts onto the bridge, and the crew drew their weapons.

Suddenly, three Kelpi burst from above them. Marseille was the first to fire, but he was quickly dissolved by a stream of acid from the first Kelpi, his bones and flesh melting into a soupy puddle on the floor. Michaud and Beltrán set their blasters to lethal and blew multiple holes into the Kelpi, who exploded into purple once his suit got pierced. Morata was huddled under a science console, but the second Kelpi yanked her by the leg and threw her into the wall. Crumpled and bleeding from all over, Morata could only stare in horror as that second Kelpi grabbed her by the head and doused her with acid. She screamed until the acid dissolved her head, leaving her skull exposed. Goodday shot at the second Kelpi with precision, right in the stalks his data confirmed were the weakest. That second Kelpi died, but not before he spent the last of his strength tearing Morata in two. All that sweet tenderness and guilt she was nursing, Goodday thought, only for them to treat her like an animal. Whatever doubts he felt about his mission were quiet now.

The last Kelpi fled like an injured hyena, and

Captain Goodday pursued him. As Goodday ran through the passageways, he could hear the sound of redshirts screaming as their bones dissolved into liquid and the hiss of Kelpi as their suits were pierced and their eight-limbed bodies exploded into purple jelly. Goodday knew this Kelpi was different: he was heading towards Engineering. He fired a few more shots with his blaster, but its energy had been spent. He grabbed a large rifle from the hands of a half-dissolved private and said somewhat curtly, “You’ll be getting a medal for this, son.”

By now, the ship’s corridors were blaring red from the alert, although core ship functions remained unaffected. Goodday took the service elevator down to Engineering, where the ship’s slipstream core was in stasis. He was unsure if the Kelpi had any actual tools to catastrophically alter the core’s alignment or if he was making a last suicidal dash towards the core, but Goodday had to assume the Kelpi had a plan. They had inflicted dozens of casualties on the crew, but one by one they were all gunned down and turned into purple stains on the floor or ceiling.

Goodday switched the translator on his uniform’s connbadge. “I don’t know what you’re planning, but it ends now!”

“You killed them! You killed them!” screamed the Kelpi, filtered through the eerily calm voice of the connbadge translator. “You are monsters.”

“You don’t understand what we’re doing, but it’s for the greater good!”

“That’s what every monster says,” said the Kelpi.

“Oh, wow, very clever. Never heard that before,” said Goodday. “Enough of your nonsense!” He tore the connbadge out of his uniform. He shot at the Kelpi, who was bumbling his way through the engine controls. The core’s stasis shields shut down, and the white-hot, wispy singularity inside the core was exposed, flooding the room with light. Goodday knew what he had to do. The Kelpi was up on a catwalk just overlooking the core. One wrong move would mean the ship exploding and all the crew dead. Not an ideal way to end a mission. Goodday lunged at the Kelpi, who spat acid at Goodday’s face, blinding him. They were both launched out of the catwalk, heading right towards the exposed core. With the last of Goodday’s strength, he screamed, and the Kelpi hissed in return before both were vaporized into nothing.

PART 7: PAPERWORK

WHEN A COMMONWEALTH crewmember dies in the line of duty, their consciousness, which is concurrently synced via quantum ansible with the computer's Anastasis System, gets yanked into a virtual server the newer crew called the "Ana," a plain white room with some refreshments and a display stand full of reassuring pamphlets. From an observer's point of view, there was no disruption to consciousness, merely the feeling of having left one room and entered the other. Marseille was the first to arrive, looking forlorn in his freeballing kilt, followed by more privates. When Morata awoke in the Anastasis room, she was still screaming from the agony of the alien acid dissolving her skull, even after the pain of it disappeared. In that white room, she, and the entirety of the slain crew, were just as they were before. More redshirts, scientists, engineers started pouring into the room until finally, the captain

arrived.

"I got him," said Captain Goodday. "I got the bastard!" Cheers and claps erupted from the crowd of the temporarily disembodied, including the private who was promised a medal. The captain ran up to him, "I used your rifle, didn't I?" said the Captain. "I'm writing you a letter of commendation, all of you! You are the bravest crew I've ever had." More cheers erupted from that plain white room. In a few minutes, the Medbay would be reconstituting their bodies, their consciousnesses transferred to new bodies and brains, unmarred and unmelted by any Kelpi acid.

Goodday remembered the first time he had become temporarily disembodied. He liked to call it his first death: one second he was an ensign aboard the SS *Recalcitrant*, the next, he was in that white room, with the same mushy pamphlets, before he emerged from the regen pod as right as rain, several light-years away back in the Alpha Centauri starbase they had passed just one week prior. A freak nova had vaporized the ship, and the ansible had transferred them all safe and sound. Goodday felt as light as a petal that first day, still unsure of what was real and what was illusion, before he returned fully embodied and fully invincible. Although, the Captain of the *Recalcitrant* was stuck filing the paperwork of that incident for weeks afterwards. Goodday sighed: he could see a mountain of forms in his

future.

Ensign Morata was still lying on the floor in a fetal position, Marseille attempting to encourage her back to her feet. First deaths, or what the brass insisted they call “disembodying events,” hit everybody hard. Goodday felt real sympathy towards Morata. What had started as a fun little tryst to pass the time had bloomed into a real mentorship. He’d grown fond of her, her intelligence and her dutifulness. It was a number of hours before every crewmember was restored to their newly regenerated bodies. Goodday promised the Chief Medical Officer a bottle of Dilurian brandy if he gave him better cardio this time around in the mortal coil.

Two days after, Ensign Morata approached Captain Goodday in his private ready room and expressed her wishes to resign her commission. After mulling it over, Goodday agreed to accept her resignation. She was a fine, young officer, but she didn’t have the stomach for adjudication. Still, Goodday was quietly stirred by her attempts to put on a brave face, despite the Kelpi ordeal weighing on her so heavily. She had already accepted an offer from the Maelstrom Institute in Malmö, Sweden, where they researched and developed new strains of plants, grasses in particular, that could turn a barren rock into a verdant, green paradise in a number of months rather than centuries.

Five days later, once the last of the purple alien chunks were scrubbed from the floors, Captain Goodday assembled the entire crew of the SS *Endeavour* in the cargo hold for one final speech before the port call on Earth. It wasn't a long speech, but it did leave the crew in much higher spirits. He even did the old "court-martial for telling you this" bit.

"I want to say something that, if it left this room, might get me court-martialed. But I trust this crew with more than just my life. Commonwealth intel showed me that the Kelpi were hiding certain facts about their reproduction. They don't hatch in groups of dozens, they release over a million eggs per brood. It was only the harshness of their planet that kept their numbers in line. But if we had let them spread across the galaxy, their numbers would've overrun us—they would've killed us all. And do you think they'd give us the opportunity to live again? To live in paradise? No! They'd destroy our Eschaton, and they'd rule over our corpses, dumb and happy until the next conquerors came in line. But we're different. Yes, I know your friends may call you killers back home, but we end life so that our children can give it." Most of the crew clapped and hollered.

After the speech, Goodday approached Morata. "Some of the crew have prepared a farewell gathering for you in one of the mess halls. Sector

C-4, the one with the squeaky gravplate. I even convinced Marseille to wear trousers this time."

Morata smiled, "Thank you, Captain. I'm grateful." She was about ready to leave when the Captain continued.

"And after that, I have a gift for you in my quarters."

"... A gift?" said Morata.

"I know you're a fan of Lafcadio Hearn, and I maybe... used up all of my credits to get you a genuine first-edition copy of *Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan*." Goodday shrugged, like a schoolboy.

"Wow... that's..." she could scarcely find the words.

"It's okay, there's no pressure. I have no ego about this sort of thing. I can just ship it to you if you want. It's just, we've known each other for two years, we've really shared a bond, and I'm so proud of you. You are the bravest woman I have ever met. I just... want to end our time together on a high note." Goodday paused before adding, "If you'll have me, of course."

Morata paused. "Yes, Captain. I'd be honored." She left, curling her hands into something like fists to stop the shaking.

PART 8: RESURRECTION

MARSEILLE AND BELTRÁN, both wearing trousers, strung up party balloons and a banner that said, “WE’LL MISS YOU!” with a lovely red heart in the center. Morata had requested her old body’s ashes, which she held in a small, white box. She told the gatherers, a dozen or so crewmembers she was friendly with, that she planned to put her ashes in an urn on her desk in Malmö as a symbol of her dedication and maybe to intimidate the interns. She’d be a senior researcher at the finest civilian institute on Earth, with a sizable bump in pay to boot. In her youth, she’d written a paper on the proliferation of Old World grasses into the interior of California and how they had completely outcompeted the natives. Now, she’d set her sights on making new plants to bring life back to dead planets.

Marseille was in one corner, regaling the newer officers about his epic battle with the Kelpi,

who he managed to kill even as his skull was exposed, saving Michaud from the indignity of being temporarily disembodied. Morata and Beltrán were off to the side, talking about that day in less heroic terms.

Beltrán took a sip of her drink, some of the Dilurian Brandy Commander Michaud had donated for their little farewell gathering. “When I saw you look like that... you know...”

“Dead? With my skeleton exposed?” said Morata. She winced a little at the thought, but she also enjoyed, perhaps too much, teasing others about how they felt about her untimely temporary passing.

“Eww, yes, like that. I knew you were just at the Ana, bored out of your mind. But when I saw you like that, I got so scared. The core was unstable, there wasn’t enough power to run the tools and regen everybody at the same time, so I had to scrape you off the floor with a putty knife...” and Beltrán sobbed uncontrollably.

Morata went to comfort her, saying, “I’m here, I’m here, it’s okay.”

When Ensign Morata came to Captain Goodday’s quarters—as he had always expected—he did the thing that made him feel like God, and she pressed her face to the sheets, thinking of all the differences between a rhizome and a rhizoid. And when the Captain finished, his snores landing in her ears like the cackling of a jammed

aerosolized dispenser, she climbed out from under his sweaty mass, cleaned up, and made her way to the bridge to fill in for the night shift ensign. Michaud greeted her warmly as the bridge doors opened, “Let’s make your last shift a quiet one, eh?” he mused.

Seated in her alcove, hearing the familiar beep and buzz of the now miraculously fixed console, she noticed a slight purple stain on the floor where the Kelpi had killed her. She hypothesized that a sufficiently motivated alien attacker could bypass the ansible link between a crewmember and the Anastasis system, enough to sever the concurrent link, leaving anyone (even an Ensign) vulnerable to real death—whatever backup they could regen would be a perfect clone, but without the persistence of qualia that made a person the same as before. No one would be the wiser, and no one would know. You could devise a helmet that floods the brain with the refracted curves of a modified photonic array, but that would take ten minutes to warm up, and the Ana would grab you long before. Maybe if you ported the auxiliary power, you could get a large enough surge, and death would be permanent, real. She imagined it’d be peaceful. But she saw Beltrán walk in with a cup of her favorite Tellurian coffee, sourced from the finest nebulas, and she kept her musings about those motivated alien attackers back on the shelf, where they belonged.

The next day, a number of crewmen, including Beltrán and a morose Marseille, gathered to say their goodbyes as Morata left on a shuttle headed to her new home in Sweden. She held her ashes, and a pristine copy of Hearn's *Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan* on her lap as the shuttle made its way to the Maelstrom Institute. She resolved in her mind to never leave the Earth again.

Goodday was back in his room, still watching the karaoke lesbians, but he had been dulled to sleep by them loading a Subaru Outback and arguing about how much luggage is too much luggage, or the fact that the rental company only had a Subaru Outback, which Dalia's mom might interpret as a provocation. He was soundly asleep, and with the VR spectacles still running, they were now miles from New York, heading to Dalia's mom in Orange County.

"You ever thought we should've taken a plane?" said Dalia, as the radio played—not "Will You Love Me Tomorrow" as Sarah had hoped—but an alt-rock song about getting and giving.

"You know you love my driving," said Sarah, as she sped up to pass a car-hauling truck full of Priuses. "Does your mom still hate me?"

"She's still calling you my friend." Dalia laughed. "We're great friends."

"You know, I got pepper spray, just in case."

"What? Pepper spray?"

"In case they, like, try to kidnap you back to

Egypt or whatever."

"That's like, borderline racist!" said Dalia, partly amused and partly horrified.

"I am so sorry, I didn't mean it like that. You know I'm from Shreveport."

"What does that have to do with the pepper spray?" The radio played "Sara Smile" next. Dalia felt as if God were telling her to quit fighting. They drove off into the path of the setting sun, Dalia now asleep, as they headed west into that big unknown, scarier than any foreign star or eight-limbed alien.